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SUBJECT: ISRAEL ENVIRONMENT & SCIENCE NOTES

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NASA Addresses Space Science Conference

[¶](#) 1. (U) Two visiting NASA astronauts, the Mars Rover project director from the NASA Jet Propulsion Lab, and the General of US Space Command were a hit with their hyper-active five-day schedule in Israel last week. They headlined the Ilan Ramon Space Sciences Conference, where they lectured on Living and Experimenting in Space, Future Mars Exploration Programs, and Space Science and Education, and also addressed the Knesset Science and Technology Forum. The group members also made presentations and took questions at four public schools, three universities, the IDF Air Force Academy, and Haifa Naval base. The Israel Space Agency, the Ministry of Science, the Ministry of Education, and Embassy ESTH office all helped coordinate the visit.

[¶](#) 2. (U) The conference was held on the fifth anniversary of the Space Shuttle Columbia (STS-107) accident of 2003, in which Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon perished along with five American astronauts. During the visit of the NASA team to Israel's parliament, Knesset member Benny Elon, chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, told the visiting delegation that Israel wanted to see another Israeli astronaut participate in the manned space flight program. Ramon was the only Israeli to ever fly in space, and Elon wants to see greater Israeli science contributions to and benefits from space technology.

[¶](#) 3. (U) President Peres, in his keynote at the Space Sciences conference, noted that Israel performs best when it engages fully in a challenge, as Israel's contributions to space science demonstrate.

Taking risks in the pursuit of knowledge is an Israeli strength, and he lauded all astronauts as supremely courageous in the risks they take for the advancement of knowledge. Peres encouraged students today to live for discovery, not live for money. He observed sagely, "It is the mind that fills the pocket, not the pocket that fills the mind."

[¶](#) 4. (U) Although science education was the theme of the visit, several lectures addressed the strategic importance of space. For Israel, "the sky is not the limit" said Israel Air Force Commander Major General Elyezer Shkedy. The communication and command role of space is critical, given present technology, and terrorism was now

capable of reaching beyond the planet's atmosphere. Physical security now depends on cyber-security and thus space security - where communication satellites are located, Shkedy noted. Israel's security now depends in part on extending its circle of knowledge in space technology, which should be structured into the education system at all levels.

Parliamentarians Target CO2 Emissions...

¶5. (U) In light of Ministry of Environmental Protection projections that Israeli CO2 emission will grow by 63 percent by 2025 due to growing transportation and electricity needs, Knesset Labor party leader Ophir Pines-Paz presented legislation calling for a 25% cut in Israel's greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 over 2000 levels. The Bill reportedly is supported by 70 Members of Knesset (a slim majority), who want to avoid the fines that developed countries are liable for under terms of the agreements reached at the Bali Climate Change negotiations in December. Israel is expected to be granted status as a full OECD member soon, which imposes obligations to curb greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The GOI has not previously set itself GHG reduction targets.

... As Do Israel's Cities

¶6. (U) Fifteen of Israel's biggest cities have an even more ambitious target: to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by one-fifth by the year 2020. The Forum of 15, as the association calls itself, announced on February 5 they will voluntarily reduce greenhouse gas emissions in their communities. The target level is drawn from other urban activist efforts, such as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) campaign, and Cities for Climate Protection (CCP). Because most greenhouse gas emissions are generated in cities, city residents are the first to suffer from an impaired quality of life, including pollution-related

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diseases and environmental decay. Some experts ascribe the increasing number of asthma cases among Israeli children to exposure to smog.

¶7. (U) To achieve their goal, the Israeli cities will undertake five actions: (1) Conduct a baseline emissions inventory and forecast, based on energy consumption and waste generation; (2) Establish an emissions reduction target for 2020; (3) Develop an action plan of policies and measures that the local government can take to reduce GHGs, also incorporating public awareness and education efforts; (4) Implement policies and measures contained in their Local Action Plan, such as energy efficiency improvements in municipal buildings and water treatment facilities, streetlight retrofits, public transit improvements, renewable power applications, and methane recovery from landfill; and (5) Monitor and verify progress on the implementation of these measures.

Record Decline for the Dead Sea

¶8. (U) The Dead Sea, already the lowest point on Earth not covered by ocean, has gotten slightly lower. Israeli hydrologists measured a 20 cm (8 inch) decline in the water level of the Dead Sea during January, the sharpest decline in years. The water level has dropped up to 3 feet per year recently, and now stands at 420.94 meters below sea level, a drop of 20 meters (65 feet) in the past 30 years. Numerous sinkholes have opened along the shoreline as a result, and tourist hotels once at the water's edge are now half a mile from the Sea. Conservationists are calling for renewing the flow of water from the Jordan River to the Dead Sea. The billion-dollar proposal to pipe water from the Red Sea to refill the Dead Sea is the subject of a feasibility study funded by the World Bank, but the study is still in the bidding stage.

Only in Israel: Kosher Electricity

¶9. (U) Communities of ultra-orthodox Jews have protested to the Israel Electric Company (IEC) that the electric current supplied to them forces them to break their religious injunctions against lighting a fire (in modern equivalent, creating a spark or turning a lightswitch on) and making other Jews work for them on Shabbat

(Saturday). They contend that electricity they receive necessitates starting and stopping generating sources, and employs Jewish workers on shifts through the weekly restday period. IEC has responded with a plan to offer them "kosher electricity," from guaranteed sources of stored battery power transmitting energy which was generated prior to the Shabbat period. Religious piety doesn't come cheap, however; the kosher electricity will be more expensive due to the investment in batteries and dedicated lines it requires, and will cost consumers more.

Bagging the Sack

¶10. (U) Two Knesset Members have introduced legislation to require store owners to charge 1 Israeli shekel (about 27 US cents) per plastic bag, in an effort to curb their widespread use. An environmental hazard, plastic bags now account for a quarter of Israel's landfill volume, as Israel's 7 million consumers use over 5 billion of them annually. The Knesset bill intends to push citizens to bring re-usable bags with them to the store, and to recycle plastic bags to keep them from polluting streets, beaches and waters; the sacks take several hundred years to decompose, and have had damaging affects on Israel's wildlife, reefs and ecology. Israel's plastics industry, while acknowledging the need for recycling, claims up to 300 industry workers could lose their jobs, and that waste reduction anticipated is overstated. Reportedly, 60 percent of Israeli households re-use old shopping sacks for household trash collection, and they will turn to buying plastic garbage bags as an alternative, with the net saving of waste volume estimated at only 5 percent. Israel's vocal environmental lobby backs the proposed measure, and stresses that educating children about it is the best way to change society's behaviour.

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